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BEAT THE CHURCH CROWD

by
Alston Tyer

A thesis submitted to the faculty of The University of Mississippi in partial fulfillment of
the requirements of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College.

Oxford, Mississippi
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Approved by

Advisor: Professor Blair Hobbs

Reader: Dr. Kathryn McKee

Reader: Professor Tom Franklin

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ABSTRACT

ALSTON TYER: *Beat the Church Crowd*
(Under the direction of Blair Hobbs)

Beat the Church Crowd is a collection of poems that explores a variety of topics and themes, from personal family legacy and natural disasters to bestiary, ekphrastic, and southern locale poems. It is divided into four sections: “Blue Danube,” “Anecdotes,” “Urban Legends,” and “Something Worth Protecting.” While the subject matter and forms of the poems vary, the common thread weaving each poem to the next is the slight touch of the macabre.

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INTRODUCTION

Difficulty exists in loving a place with your whole heart, but seeing the worsening cracks in ceilings and knowing the bathtub could have used a good caulking ten years ago. Difficulty exists in loving a family member unconditionally, and still knowing that they have affected you for the worse. One of my favorite television shows is *Planet Earth*, and though my mother asks me to turn it off every time I watch it in the living room, as she “doesn’t want to see those animals eating each other,” I love it because it shows the beauty of the world laid bare: it is breathtaking, it is heartrending. At times, it is morbid. Life.

Beat the Church Crowd is my aim in seeing things as they are, or at least trying to understand why I see things the way I do. The bulk of the “Blue Danube” section is made up of poems that try to grapple with the lives of my deceased family members: great-grandparents, great-great grandparents, second cousins. I never met these people, though their lives and choices color my own life and the lives of those I care the most about. And just like in *Planet Earth*, which will have you cheering for the wildebeest escaping a lion pride at one moment, the next have you misty-eyed because the infant lion cubs might starve to death, I never wanted to shy away from the grisly. I never wanted to shy away from the fact that every choice has consequences, positive or negative.

The “Blue Danube” section, and indeed *Beat the Church Crowd* as a whole, was inspired by my love of the Southern Gothic genre. Stories like “A Good Man is Hard to Find,” by Flannery O’Connor, and “Désirée’s Baby,” by Kate Chopin, illustrated to me that one of the best ways to expose flaws in society (specifically Southern society), or in

family dynamics, was to get almost hyperbolic in the grittiness and violence in my poems. The influence of stories like “A Rose for Emily,” by William Faulkner, are evident in poems that deal with the South’s obsession with femininity, such as the poems “Diamonds” and “Ode to Dead Stump.” The poem “Elegy for James Stone” has an epigraph from *The Sound and the Fury*, by William Faulkner, for a variety of reasons. One, the poem has to deal with family legacy and reputation, which I felt analogous to the themes of the novel. Second, James Stone was my actual great-great grandfather who lived in Oxford at the same time as William Faulkner. The Stone family was close with the Faulkner’s (my Uncle Phil Stone was one of Faulkner’s pallbearers), and in Susan Snell’s biography *Phil Stone of Oxford, A Vicarious Life*, Snell posits that elements of the people in Faulkner’s Oxford showed up as characters in his works. Phil Stone confirmed this, saying that “anybody who knew Jim Stone would recognize him by the way Jason talks” in *The Sound and the Fury* (Snell 209). Ordinarily, this tentative link to literary history would be incredible. However, this legacy is complicated by Jason’s status as a virulent racist and sexist, and what I know from conversations with my grandmother about James Stone, these descriptions of James were not far off from the man himself.

Another genre that heavily influenced my poetry is that of dystopia/post-apocalyptic. Relating again to extreme circumstances giving way to exposure of current states of affair, my love of books such as *The Road*, by Cormac McCarthy, and *On the Beach*, by Nevil Shute, influenced my more fantastical poems, such as “Arc,” “Plague,” and “Fish in a Barrel.” The things I love most about those novels, and poems such as “There Will Come Soft Rains,” by Sara Teasdale, is the interconnectivity between humanity and nature, and the little details that emerge through examination of that

relationship. For example, one of the most striking parts of *The Road*, to me, is when McCarthy describes the post-apocalyptic countryside, detailing a barn that has “Visit Rock City” painted on it. While this image is meaningful to anyone who has ever been within five-hundred miles of Tennessee, it works to bridge the gap between a broken humanity and an equally broken nature. In some ways, I aim to bridge the same gaps with my poetry.

Apart from Southern Gothic and Dystopian literature, one of my biggest influences, particularly in the section titled “Something Worth Protecting,” is that of the subject of geology. I am not a scientist, never have been, and never will be. However, the natural world has always fascinated me, and learning how it formed and how it functions was cause for ceaseless wonder. Subtle touches of geology can be seen in several of my poems, even apart from the “Something Worth Protecting” section. For example, “Changes in Latitude, Changes in Latitude” references hurricanes and “Diamonds” has a brief reference to the formation of diamonds and other minerals. After a class lecture on Mass Wasting, the geologic umbrella term that covers landslides, mudslides, and the like, I stumbled upon a video of the Pantai Remis Landslide of 1993. The level of destruction, watching the ocean overflow into an abandoned tin mine, was captivating. Despite the low camera quality, it was one of the most beautiful things I had ever seen. What made it even more beautiful was that I knew exactly why the land barrier between ocean and open mine had failed: thus, the poem “Liquefaction” was born.

There is an awful beauty in seeing things as they are. An unsettling thought is that there may be no set way that things are, just changes and shifts in perspective, light

fracturing through a crystal prism. *Beat the Church Crowd* is my attempt at using poetry to understand the world around me, for all its magnificence and for all its horror.

Blue Danube

“So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past.”
-F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*

At a Calhoun County Cemetery

My mother gave me a great-grandmother's name.
Not yours, Irene, and I wonder if that slight
set you off as much as it did your daughter,
if your bone fist balled up and struck the lid
of your coffin, cutting deep, carving grooves
with your dusted knucklebones on the spot
where I stand above you. My grandmother pats
your stone once, twice, tells me she brought
me out to this place because once she's gone,
you'll truly be gone, Irene, and I, the last living
Spraberry who isn't dead to her, must pass down
your lifetime to children who haven't been born,
who won't be born for years and years, if at all.
That's too much power for a young woman's hands.

You handed down your faults, your grievances, maybe
a virtue or two (though no one ever spoke of you kindly)
to your daughter, she to her son, he to his daughter. Me.
A generational game of slap-hands bullfrog, balancing
a candle in the palm of your hand as you smack it down
the line, and you curse furies when the candle falls, white
wax dripping through fingers, down sunken palm lines,
when the flame extinguishes in the dirt below.

The twin names on your tombstone leak black,
brackish tears, a doppelganger image, rain, sun
weathering cold rock in humid weather, day in, day out.
A few years will pass. Your name will sink into the stone
like a body decaying. My grandmother, your daughter,
knew the way to you without thinking, without a map, guided
by a beaten road and ghosts of buildings, a child's home,
looking for a pecan grove that burned to the last root,
lost to the same fire (faulty duct-taped wire – a fireman's
field day) that devastated the house your husband built.
The house he died in. I forget as soon as we drive away.

What am I to tell those who are yet to come?
That their great-great-grandfather, Dennis Lavon,
cursed the Japanese and their cars until the day
he died for shooting down overthrown sailors,
shipwreck survivors, in the waters of the Pacific
Theater, passed that hate down to his daughter.
The two of them ignored the Fat Man and
the Little Boy, who mushroomed and turned civilians

to ash, to shadows. War is war. And you, Irene Fontaine,
what shall I tell them of you? I know but fragments,
your life a mirror fallen from a third story window.
I try to piece the shards together, but can only see
my own face, reflected back tenfold in every sliver.

Jewel

You're sandwiched between two men
in the sepia stained withered photograph.
I know the one on your right – my left –
is Grandpa Larry because the way he squints
into the camera is the same way Dad does,
the same way I do, when a photographer
tells you to smile, and the sun makes a
perfect halo around his head as it burns your eyes.

There's no way you could have known,
your arm around Larry, cigarette in hand
(the rebel you are, with your short skirt
and your shirt untucked) that the baby
you hadn't had yet – you look far too young –
as well as you, and Grandpa Larry, would
stand up like dominos and keel over
one after the other, thirty years out
in a suffocating Mississippi summer.

Larry with his shirt untucked died
during the funeral of his only son.
Cancer whittled down his bones.
When Dad, fresh-faced and little,
stopped by to see his grandpa after
they put his father in the ground,
(did you know Multiple Sclerosis can kill you?)
he saw a bed, starch-white sheets,
and the indentation of a grandpa
who'd been there just two hours ago.

Where were you, Jewel? It's hollow,
seeing the cigarette in your fingers
dangling loosely, knowing even then
your lungs were blackening, your cells
eaten up like a newspaper, wicking and
curling in a fireplace. Did you see the shadows
of your husband and son cast long on the walls
of your hospital room as you coughed and wheezed and died?

Elegy for James Stone

“The field only reveals to man his own folly and despair, and victory is an illusion of philosophers and fools.”

—William Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury*

They found Jimmy Stone’s body at the bottom
of a well, built beneath the arms of a sprawling

Magnolia, glass broken from his bourbon bottle
scattered, thrown as if he’d tried to guide his way

home, dropped breadcrumbs and ribbons tied to
every tenth tree, to remember the way back as

he made the sign of the cross and jumped. No Stone
ever fell off any wagon, but straightened their ties

or gathered their skirts and plunged off themselves,
skulls thick, minds made. Rust stained a stone wet

halfway down, a war diamond, and days later when
the boys down the road helped haul Jimmy’s bloated

corpse out of the well, they’d found it run dry. Empty,
like Jimmy’s checkbook the day he’d stumbled out

into the woods, fresh from an ill-fated game of
Blackjack. His granddaughter came after, chewing at

the inside of her cheek. She brought a beer, smashed
it on the well’s rock lip and watched the shards plummet

down the passage, like sparks ricocheting off a telephone
pole struck by lightning, brown dust pasted on the shards.

The family drowned the Jimmy-sized hole in their hearts
as he did best, a quiet memorial in the bottom of a shot

glass, or fallen down dizzy at the foot of a staircase, cupfuls
of the liquor he lost in his downfall turning, shattering

in the dirt, sinking deep into the roots, sinking deeper down
into the earth, farther down than Jimmy ever could have fallen.

Diamonds

Matsy was left with twelve diamonds,
a dead husband, her girls to watch for.
Matsy married an heiress's son, not
knowing he'd drink away his fortune
on the heels of a world at war. Matsy
molded perfect women, all for her girls.

Sewing, sock darning, she taught her girls
baking, Bible verses. Her daughters, diamonds,
once coal, under pressure, beautiful. Matsy
saw her world. Her husband died for
her to understand what is real: fortune
in family is priceless to what gold cannot

touch. She'd played cards, they did not
measure to the sight of her sleeping girls,
sneaking goodnight kisses worth a fortune,
a hand thrust skyward to God, full of diamonds.
She asked for more time with them, begged for
her girls to stay little. To love her, prayed Matsy.

Her love drawn and quartered, Matsy
hid the world, taught her baby girls to not
make the damned mistakes of their father, for
she saw different parts of him in all the girls.
To a jeweler she took the whole of her diamonds,
estimated that the brave are favored by fortune.

She split the rest of what was left of her fortune.
Three jewels for each daughter, what Matsy
saw as insurance, an investment in diamonds
for who her little girls would become. Not
a dowry auctioned to the noisiest bidder, her girls
held legacies, a promise, something to look for.

Into rings and necklaces they set, trinkets for
passing down to daughters, little fortunes
all their own. For her girls had their own girls
had their own girls in turn, passing down Matsy's
love even if unknown. The heirloom ring did not
celebrate marriage. Each love created diamonds.

A mother of three girls wears the silver ring for
the day diamonds tarnish and lay waste to fortune.
Glinting lights reminisce Matsy. She is here and she is not.

Bouquet

Everything turns in on itself.
I tear ahead, bouquet in hand.

I remember the bunches
of red and blue flowers
on tablecloths in the tent.
Strewn outwards like a fountain
frozen in time. The light blue
Larkspur a stark turn from the
spectators' navy. First quarter,
see and be seen. Second,
keep an eye on Mother,
who complains about the heat.
Halftime comes. A plea
to leave with us ignored.
Aren't these flowers lovely?

Door opens. I throw the bouquet
on the island, then unlock
my own door. Strewn across the floor
and counter, the delphiniums
are the blue blood of Ajax;
not that my mother has ever
once had the tailgate catered.
Murmurs of an ambulance.
That's not necessary, she says.
Just need rest. She turns to me:
Do you have a vase for those flowers?

Margaritas

You sit across from your best friend and
you both drink salt-lipped margaritas. *I wish*

they made these in smaller sizes, you laugh.
One of these bad boys is enough to make me

silly. She pours salt on the chips and you raise
your eyebrows, mutter *cholesterol* under

your breath while your head swims, and the
jingle of your car keys makes you giggle like you,

your fobs, trinkets, and keys share a schoolgirl's
secret as you slide them across the table to her.

The heirloom Jacob's Ladder toy dies with you.
You lit a bonfire and your hand held a knife over it,

close enough to flame that the tiny hairs on your
arm stood on end. A handful burnt off and turned

to ash, teetotaling to the wheeling flames below.
You took that burning knife as it coughed cinders

and severed a ribbon, cauterizing stray threads
that plastic blackened, an unfortunate inheritance

you don't want, never wanted, but might be
court-ordered to keep. You know the hours

you can get a dollar off margaritas at your second
favorite restaurant. You know which places around

town have the best cocktails. You look back down
at the ladder you burned and realize, with horror,

that it grew back, doubled in length. To calm frayed
nerves you pour yourself a drink and your shaking

hands spill ice cubes under the refrigerator. Look and
see how they melt over time in puddles of themselves.

Hospital Sketches

The first time it snowed in my new state
I watched flakes casting ash past yellowed
streetlamps from a hospital waiting room.
I have eaten dirt. I have been wrapped in
plaster when my young spine wrenched
like a splintered green wood sapling hit
once then twice by a lumberjack's axe.
Wet strips of papier-mache laid next to my
spine on the ground laid next to the wriggling
serpent that people forget lived in Eden too.
Kids had flu. Kids had cancer. Kids had twisted
back deformities years strapped in a brace
couldn't fix. I have slept in as my mother's
heart seized. I have worn face masks and set
gloved chickens loose when doctors let us finally be.

When my sister was born I poked her blinking eyes.
When my sister was born I was inconvenienced.
My father snuck whiskey miniatures in his pocket,
past tired nurses and night watchmen. We passed
an old man, skin like paper, gurney-bound, wheeled
and parked in front of a waiting room's broken TV.
A second cousin's husband committed her to hospice,
said *Take her off machines*, broke Christmas plans.
Wanting her leaden, dead-weight stand mixer back,
she refused to die and held onto an ice-cold Diet
Doctor Pepper until her long-dead cat jumped to
her bed's end and meowed. A strict March deadline.
My back, her throat, her eyes, his head, her heart,
our lives, until we get the call to collect a rosewood
box: sealed, placed on the mantle, burning, heavy.

Anecdotes

“I had a funny feeling as I saw the house disappear, as though I had written a poem and it was very good and I had lost it and would never remember it again.”

-Raymond Chandler, *The High Window*

Ode to Dead Stump

After the Easter Sunday meal,
I stood outside in my
pink petal dress with
white polka dots
(I wore that dress
to cotillion, my pair
of white gloves holding
the sweaty hands
of a mystery boy,
the two of us locked
in a toe-stepping waltz)

The mist of a rain
that wasn't quite rainfall
hung overhead,
the kind that ruined
my hot-roller curls
despite my White Rain,
and I wiped away the wisps
of hair the wind
blew into my face,
bow strung, arrow nocked.

I let it loose,
arrow after arrow
aiming for you,
the stump on the hill,
your wood dead long enough
that when I got a good shot
the bolt sunk in
with a thunk,
unless, of course, I aimed too high,
arrows whistling into grey sky,
fletching vanes spiraling
like Icarus.

Backyard half-rot,
you must've towered
high in your hey-day,
looking down at the
odd double-fence
that separated us from
the back-door neighbors,
the one I climbed over,
little hands gripping,
twice over, twice back
as I brought home arrows
that flew too close to the sun.

Dentist's Ghazal

I left sixth grade early, flossing my teeth on the ride to the dentist
I'd rather see the doctor a million times before I went, eyes wide, to the dentist.

"Do you floss all your teeth twice daily?" Asked the man, his wrinkled
white coat too big on his shoulders. "Oh yes!" I smiled back, as I lied to the dentist.

If inflicting human suffering is your passion, don't fret! Look at all the ways you can
cause people harm: root canal, crowns. The job's a substitute for homicide, to the dentist.

I brush my teeth pearly out of fear of the snakes. One day I'll lash back –
One cavity filling too far, and I'll give my dose of nitrous oxide to the dentist.

Mouth prop, bite block, they lined my teeth with bubblegum grit, slip,
stab, "Alston, do you really floss?" Metal in mouth, mumbling, I cried to the dentist.

Pine Needle Tea

We found the recipe for pine needle tea online,
back when I was young enough to be swept up
in adventure, unafraid of dirt beneath fingernails,
pulling ticks off my own legs, flicking off crawlers.
We gathered wet underbrush and sticks to set a fire,
but I'd quit Girl Scouts too early to use flint or tinder.
Her father had lighter fluid, kept in the laundry room
that held a doomsday prepper's pantry, hanging clothes,
and the oldest computer known to man. We set a log cabin
but her house sat atop a hill that sloped down to a creek
we only visited once the twenty years I knew her.
Twigs stacked Lincoln Logs rolled downhill, away,
head over end faster than we could ever hope to catch.
She threw handfuls of pulpy leaves at the foot of a tree
only a day ago held the upside-down carcass of a deer,
feet bound and dangling over a cracked plaster bucket.

She held the bottle with both hands. Lighter fluid smothered
rain-stained leaves until the match spark skeletonized the pile.
I held the metal pot, filled halfway with tap water and garnished
with the fallen pine needles of a past fall, hands wavering,
watching pieces of mud we failed to brush off flake apart
and break the surface. I spilled the sweaty broth on the ground,
managed to catch some in twin mugs we'd packed in our rucksacks,
but when we clinked ceramics together and took the first sip,
she spat it out, onto the ground. I did the same, coughing as
I dumped the rest onto the hiccupping fire. The pan in my hands
caught the forgotten ingredient, a teaspoon of lighter fluid, coating
our hands, our lips, our teeth, our throats. I, the summer Southerner
city-mouse, dropped my mug as I stood under the tree where
her father and sister on either side struggled to roll deer skin down,
tacky blackened blood dripping between gloved fingertips.

The Price of Candy

It's after midnight on Halloween, the doorbell's stopped ringing, and I am so brave and fifteen that I can watch *The Silence of the Lambs* because it's a thriller, not horror, so it's different, and I sneak back downstairs at three in the morning with all my mother-coveted Butterfingers, put them back in the bowl one-by-one, because Buffalo Bill only grabbed fat women for his skin suit and everyone knows I only run if I'm being chased.

Invasive Species

A demon drove to the grocery store
just ahead of me to hook a clawed,
gnarled hand behind the five dollar
pints of coffee chocolate ice cream
to seize towards itself, dropping
gelatos in quick succession into its
handheld plastic basket like lemmings
shoved one after the next off a sheer
cliff face. I've done the unthinkable,
something unfathomable to earn its ire,
but the acid-orange drink that knocked
me out cold in my teenaged-riddled
insomnia days disappeared from
the shelf and energy drinks crawled
forth in its absence and spanned
and multiplied like zebra mussels
slipping through a water treatment
plant's rusted utility grate, mollusks
growing and bloating to crowd
with their fire-forged teammates.
Mussel judges gave a standing ovation,
a black-and-white scorecard 10:
they'd blocked the pipes feeding
Lake Champlain and God help the person
who tried to pry them off. A boy cried
to my sister when he couldn't shake
his monstrous Red Bull habit. The cynic
who set up a black-and-white detective's
office in the noir corner of my brain,
who's got legs for days and blinks against
striped rectangle lights seeping in through
window blinds, wished nothing more than
for his heart to explode so he leaves her
house for good and she never has to smell
the enriched flour of a cardboard,
quick-and-ready pizza ever again.

To the Front-Row Intellectual

What is a poem if not incomprehensible?
If it makes students want to throw their
collections of Robert Frost at a wall,
scribble “I Hate Robert Frost” on top
of every page of notes, or trudge off
the road less travelled by to bushwhack
with a machete and fall face first into
fresh snow and stay there – is that not
the quintessence of the craft? Words
will stuff tubes down students’ throats,
inflate egos with helium: *Well, in Beowulf –
Oh, I’m sorry, have you heard of Beowulf?
Have you heard of Beowulf? Let me ask
a question not because I wish to know
an answer, but to show you that I have,
in fact, read Beowulf. Grendel had a mother?*
A single tear rolls down an oily face.
Their silence is dark, lovely, deep.
*Oh, I knew that, of course, for I have read
Beowulf. Let me demonstrate sesquipedalian
loquaciousness because in my infinite
intellect I know people must loathe me
not because I am insufferable, but because
I am surely more intelligent than they.*

Gold Medal

Out of solidarity and faith
 you hate her roommate –
This friend-of-a-friend who
 never does her dishes,
who brings back boys and shakes
 the walls and shoots drugs
up in her good clean home, earning
 half a grand from not
kissing until she can drive a car.
 Fingers crossed, uncrossed:
Girls who sit like this want this like that.
 Wine is pink and soothes
the house of red Olympians,
 the crowd, the two-dollar
pizza cut, and while you use all
 your focus to read the side-
hanging wall mugs, how to hold
 the coffee cup you drink
out of for the fourth time, six-dollar
 cut of the college wine,
the girl you hate because you're
 a good friend, and good friends
spew vitriol and spite to protect those
 who would dash them against
rocks – she laughs and dangles lanky
 arms over your shoulders.
She plants a drunken feather kiss
 square on your cheek,
whispers words you cannot remember
 as you scan the room for
witnesses. You wish the cheers of American
 gold snowboarding victories came
a second sooner so you could turn
 your head just so: you, the
girl you hate, the girl who sees you,
 the den of lions distracted.

Sudafed

I was dog-sick
and carless,
waking up
in the middle
of the night
unable to breathe
through my nose,
sitting on a folded
toilet seat – sink on,
shower on, as hot
as water would go,
filling the room
with steam that I
tried to breathe,
but instead ate
in clouded gasps
as I took a shot
of whiskey – or
maybe it was scotch –
I don't know the
difference, like bourbon
and whiskey back home.
(Whiskey forever –
bourbon is Kentucky
and Kentucky is nothing
but a cowboy hat placed
on Tennessee's pool-side
lounger. Don't tell me
the barrels are better.
Jack Daniels himself
cried into this bottle,
stood on a dock or
the deck of yacht and
threw it into the ocean,
it found its way to me,
displaced expatriate.)
Alcohol kills germs.
Alcohol kills lots of things,
I told myself, and I
felt better, though
I still couldn't breathe
through my nose.
When I could breathe
through one nostril

I decided to climb
the dead volcano.
Not to the top –
I'd done it twice
and with the lungs
of a trusty, lifelong
secondhand smoker,
with the strong heart
that might take me
at forty-three, god unwilling.
The cliffs (or crags) seemed
an option better suited
for me, the girl who stopped
and read every plaque
at the history museum,
who tried to look
Dolly the Sheep in her
taxidermied, miracle
eyes, but the glass case
revolved in slow circles,
giving schoolchildren a shot
to see. She oscillated back,
head thrown to the side,
as if she'd just kicked up
some of the hay surrounding
her lifeless mutton legs.
As she turned to me,
turned away again, an
endless undulation,
turning and finding the edges,
the new frontiers of a round,
lived-in Earth, I would've sworn
that Dolly, in her hour of death,
motioned with her trotters,
(are they truly her hooves,
or the combined thrice-cloven
hooves of her three mothers?)
summoned her caretaker,
bahhhed sweetly in their ear: *Take
me to the National Museum
of Scotland, for far in the future
a girl will come here, hard with
her R's, American, and everything
we've worked for here in this lab
will be for naught if I'm not
stuffed with cotton, given*

*glass eyes, and put on display
for her to see. You will know
her when you see her, or hear
her talk or breathe, for her nose
is pugged and half-blocked.
Please take her aside, this Chosen
One, and give her a Sudafed.*

Changes in Latitudes, Changes in Attitudes
After the song by Jimmy Buffett

Jimmy Buffett loves the beach. Alston Tyer loves the beach. Parrot on her head,
Alston Tyer loops Boat Drinks in Mississippi and sips a Pina Colada
and thinks: if I don't go to the beach right now, I'll die.
Jimmy croons as Avery speeds and hits
the brakes and we smack the car
in front of us. No damage
but a crack to her hood,
the girls in front of us open
and shut their jeep back and wave
us on: Island Time unites better than
tragedy and mass destruction, hysteria,
links hearts with margarita havens better
than the uprooted palms, shattered boardwalks
of hurricanes. Even grey, churning, riptide ocean waves
crash in tandem to heartbeats in ears – even when a clouded sky
necessitates sunscreen Alston Tyer doesn't wear – the seagull's screech
an ear-balm, every day is a countdown again to the water, to petal pink shells
you cut your feet on, the sandbars, an oil rig on the horizon line, deep breaths and
checking your bank account when the urge to buy a boat and sail off in it overwhelms, to
row out to the edge of the world and past it – desert island, skipper plane, time perpetual.

To the Man Who Gave Me His Seat on the Bus

Our children will be named Walton Arthur
And Elizabeth, if your surname sounds
sweet hyphenated with mine. The kids will
have my pug nose. Pity them. With your eyes
they look at photo albums after we've
gone: the beach, my arms red and peeling as
I splash water over your head. You took books
into the ocean, soaked one every time.
Our first baby, in their first picture, has
oversized sunglasses perched on their pink
button nose. I'm sweaty and barefaced. You
wear the basketball shorts you know I hate.
We drive to a dark field at night, all of us splayed
out in a circle on the crunched grassy ground.
My sneakers touch your boots, touch their light-up
Velcro tennis shoes. You take their little
hands, trace the constellations. I tell them
which star is actually Mars, and when
they're old and their memories fade like bath
water seeping down a clogged drain, they can
look night skyward, and without knowing why,
feel the world was made deeper by us two.

Bumper Sticker Funeral

If my family and friends advertise
my untimely death with a car decal,
let them have the decency to disclose
what on earth happened, so bored
teenagers riding shotgun seatbeltless
will know not only that I was a caring
daughter and friend but the long and
short of it all. Folks rarely list in obituaries
how the deceased bit it: open your
glove box and put on your deerstalker,
piece together the story from comments
of condolences, crowdfunded funeral
costs and medical bills, a local news article.
Montana and Mississippi are joined
in deadly car crash union, cancers,
for here you can still see walking around
men with dip indents in their back jean
pockets. Light a virtual candle on the
funeral home page for a kid you have never
met, will never meet, drive past the mobile
tombstones and know that everyone buried
has someone who cared to put them there.

Angels

Never tell people you
collect angels, they're all
you'll get for Christmas
for years until angels
with porcelain hands
stretching upwards to God,
sunbeams manipulating
tree-topped marionettes,
push the seams of mold
festered asbestos, push
the roof off your house –
Mine eyes have seen the
glory of the coming of the
Lord in every frayed tulle
skirt and jostled attic box
that shatters halos to pieces.

Urban Legends

“In woods around her the invisible cricket choruses had struck up, but what she heard were the voices of the souls climbing upward into the starry field and shouting hallelujah.”

-Flannery O'Connor, “Revelation”

The Carnton Porch Guest

Suppose you marched North in grey during the Civil War straight up to Nashville when your superiors, who'd dragged their writing war desks into the parlor of the family whose plantation you slept on last night, slammed doors and shuttered windows because them Yankee sonsabitches turned off all their oil lamps, snuck by single-file in the night. Once the fighting started proper, a stray bullet caught you in the thigh; your brothers-in-arms dragged you back to the bedroom upstairs where the surgeon standing in a halo of blood gripped his knife and hacksawed your leg off. God's grace can only get you so far. You breathed still, but your wound turned gangrenous and festered black. You didn't know what gangrenous meant until you enlisted, and you couldn't spell it if your mother's life depended on it. They sat you out on a rocking chair on the wrap-around porch for the good, clean air. Sawbones said miasmas would be the death of you, not your necrotic stump, bandaged with the same crimson-specked cloth they pulled off the arm of a dead man. While you sat still in the rocking chair, you saw them carry you away. You had to squint, but you could see a handful of graves grow to dozens, to hundreds, like maggots on a dead horse. You saw a woman in black, and you could tell as she got closer that she was the wife of the man who owned the house. The air was good and warm so you rocked a little longer. You saw electric lights strung up, tar paved all over your good, dirt-beat roads. You saw horseless wagons and the house fall into disrepair, you saw people come and fix up the house, you saw little children led by a woman in a skirt too short to be decent, and you kept rocking, though no breeze moved you. Rays of sun glinted off a reinstalled window and you saw a child inside looking out through you, and came to realize your own face didn't reflect back.

Winter Ghazal

A girl left to play with neighbors, puffy coat zipped – outside it's cold
enough to freeze to death, but the snow's piled high, white, and cold.

I know what you're getting for Christmas! The little girl shrieks, smile checked
with one front tooth. Her mother sighs, thinking how she'll scold.

Picking herself up from the ice-rink, botched toe-loop, her hands squeeze tight,
her thumbs indrawn. She swears: *this is the last time I'll ever be cold.*

Tears streak down a reddened face, breaths exhaled in clouded puffs,
she tries to grab his hands with hers. He shakes his head, face drawn, cold.

Hands too close to an all-stone fireplace, chili warming on a stove,
Hat drawn off, hand to forehead. *Oh, my baby, you're ice cold!*

Dear Tree-Hugger

We only once visited your cabin,
the one you and my grandfather
bought nestled wood-side on the edge
of a pond. My grandfather told me, lies
whistling through teeth, that you sold it.
My mother took me aside, told me
not to tell my cousin, but you'd been out
there alone, flat-backed, looking up
at a cloudless sky, mosquitoes nipping
at your face. Mud-crusted camo boots
splayed out spread-eagle, arms out too,
grasping at a pine trunk in your last seconds of life.

We sat on the dock you built, the one time
we visited, and let our little legs hang
so that we brushed the pond with the tips
of our toes, water shallow and rippling out.
It could have become a tsunami in Japan,
ripples growing to waves, to behemoths,
had the pond stretched out farther,
meeting streams to tributaries to rivers,
groundwater sucked up by gray clouds
sagging under their own weight and taken
halfway across the world, or staying above us
and raining down on the dock where
we saw mosquito eggs under the surface.
My cousin swore they were tadpoles, but they
were the larvae you saw in tire swings
or clay pots in your backyard.

Your land is sold and the cabin is gone.
It's nothing more than a rotted wooden
frame. The dock's still brilliant, the wood
rain-stained, weary, more splinter than board.
You run your fingernails across it, and it's like
driving seventy on the backroads, potholes
sending you airborne. You place a hand to your
chest and it vibrates, your teeth chatter.
Did the fallen pine crush you across the middle,
or flatten you long-ways, like a possum bounced
once, twice, eighteen times
under the thundering wheels of a big-rig semi?

Spam

A balding football coach taught
eighth grade career prep,
his grass-stained sneakered
feet propped up on his plastic desk,
sweating and laughing as he fed
a career DVD to the projector –
behind him, a bookshelf lined and
packed, cram-full, with years-old
tinned and blue-canned Spam.

Tied with a glittered blue ribbon,
machine packaged and passed off to
suggestible, susceptible middle school
students: sewers, cranberries, dirty jobs
of banker, lawyer, truck driver,
bright futures manning spotlights
in community theatres, all musty,
salty, state-mandated, neat, meaty,
vacuum-sealed, people-shaped cubes.

Rat, Undated

After the painting by Leonard Baskin

I am a big fat rat.
Inked in black debris,
Well now, how about that?

In this frame I've sat
since Baskin drew me;
I am a big fat rat.

I'm ratkind's diplomat -
Abstract O'Keefe's I see.
Well now, how about that?

Garbage aristocrat:
"This is art," you agree.
I am a big fat rat.

I'm quite good to look at.
Rat-framed reality.
Well now, how about that?

Was this all tit for tat?
Black Death's a warning plea.
I am a big fat rat.
Well now, how about that?

In Case of Emergency

Do not lock yourself in
the metal deathtrap,
the decades old elevator:

“May stop short of floor.”
Flaming, crumbling floors
fed by cellulose and eight

printed pages of chaos theory,
neat, butterfly stapled to
charring bulletin boards.

The “s” has burned off
the door to the stair.
The lab has dual exits.

The great unknown cries
and its tears are fire –
Outlined in black ink,

Use the other door **PLEASE!**

Outlined in black ink,
its tears are fire and
the great unknown cries

the lab has dual exits,
the door to the stair.
The “s” has burned off,

charring bulletin boards.
Neat, butterfly stapled to
printed pages of chaos theory.

Fed by cellulose and eight
flaming, crumbling floors,
“May stop short of floor,”

the decades-old elevator,
the metal deathtrap,
do not lock yourself in.

Fish in a Barrel

She lives now in the pet supply shop. Cat food, she has found, tastes better than dog food. Both are gone now and she eats the dust people used to sprinkle over their rainbow painted fish. Most novice-bought fish die in weeks. She had not died yet. The shelter cats she keeps in tiny cages at night for their own good. The cats leave when food runs out, sprinting and hissing and darting through the shattered still automatic doors. Into night without end she watches them run until they are gone, into a lasting darkness she cannot brave yet. Over time, fish flakes do not bother her. She hefts wood planks from the back office, uses them to board up open spaces. Dirty dusted windows, busted glass doors, linking the tops of aisles. A catwalk, a contingency plan. In the back office rots the sallow corpse of a man with a key ring. The outside is too dangerous to risk ridding him. She lets the red-eye cornsnake and the ticker-tape ball python out of their glass cages that tinged green lacking weeks of cleaning. Fearing, at first, they would leave her, she checks on them daily. In the front of the back office door they slither under the dead man's arms, through holes they have burrowed through his torso, through the empty unseeing socket of his left eye.

Bat Out of Hell

After the painting by Glennray Tutor

Screaming rebel rocket with report,
the bat-cat hybrid pulled itself from
the fifth level of hell with only opal
fangs and all the wrath it could muster.
Bat-cat took souvenir parts of home along,
the fire sparked in its ira eyes ravaging
sclera like kudzu on the house of a man
who died childless, like the gooseflesh
spreading up prickling arms and hands
hiding shut eyes when the final girl creeps
towards the door that hides the masked
assassin. The bat-cat lost its head in the
wrenching climb landwards, the devils
below wheezing with tickled ribs as they
set fire to its bat-cat tail and watched it
spiral upwards to the earth, a doomed
sixties' space mission, bat-cat howling
and whorling to heavens before human
error and miscalculation send it hurtling
down. For a moment, the bat-cat streamed
above it all, cartwheeling in the night sky,
dropkicking stars and transforming the entire
spectrum of both light and color, everything
and nothing all at once before fire crept up
the wick to the bat-cat's spinal cord, a hand
thrust outwards to the Pleiades in life-lorn
desperation before the stars winked out,
embers doused, and all dimmed to darkness.

Jailbird

His name, if he ever had one,
is lost like the chunks of panned
gold nuggets the forty-niners
said they'd find in the hills
just a hike from town, then
blow on bordellos and craps
tables. Jack Hardin said he'd
killed a foreign ambassador
and was hiding from the law
in plain sight. Louisa said he
was the one who'd burned
down the Lindgren's house,
while Old Chuck and Alice swore
up and down he'd been the one
who'd shot Miss Kate's brother
on the doorstep of the bank.
Miss Kate told Henry at the
general store if he'd been her
brother's killer, he wouldn't be
in any jail, but swinging from
the rock-side edge of the bluffs
east of town. Pastor Robinson
sat with the man sometimes, on
the other side of the bars, lamenting
the evils of the bottle and the cards
and the dice and the original sin
of being born. The man in the jail,
as the sheriff called him, winked
and smiled and fell asleep on the
bench while Robinson droned
Leviticus. The Widow Collier sat
with him too, sometimes, old
as she was, brought her knitting
and talked about grandchildren
out past Fort Laramie and others
back Chicago-side. Jeremiah said
he'd been kicked in head by a
horse when he stole it, made
deaf-mute. "Cain't hang a deaf-
mute," he said, spitting tobacco
into the thoroughfare. "It's in the
Constitution. I read it. Don't believe
me and I'll tell you to bring me a
copy of it, show you just where

the Founding Fathers said you cain't
hang a man who's been horse-kicked
in the head."

Apex

We were too old for mermaids
and not old enough for water aerobics
when we night-swam in the pool
sans a grandparent's blessing.
Darkness stained green-tinged
water blue, nearly black but
for the silver waves glinting off
moon and porchlight. Shadows
grew in the deep end, a place
the light never touched. Shark-sized.
Though we knew no Great White
stalked Nana's forest-facing
Mississippi pool, sometimes alligators
slithered into snowbirds' backyards,
ate their little yipping dogs.
The old folks too, from time to time.
Once there was a woman, an octogenarian,
who should have been in the Alzheimer's
ward of her nursing home. Her family
couldn't afford it, or decided they couldn't.
One summer night, with a brain of fog,
she wandered out the building and into
the bayou, barefoot, into the snapping jaws
of a crocodile – or alligator – or other apex
predator with rows of razorwire teeth.
The next morning, a search party found
only a pair of legs sticking out of the pond
like matchsticks, varicose veins
tinged blue, severed red.

Treasure Triptych

John Murell's been dead for a century
and a half, his outlaw gang better fit for
hitting wagon trains bound west, rather than
hiding in bushes on the Old Natchez
Trace, a knife stabbed in a homemade map, dragged
downwards through Nashville, cleaving into thirds
Mississippi, silhouetting the deep,
deep South. Murrell was an awful man with
an awful mustache. He made his fortune
as a highwayman, horse thief, slave-stealer.
When sentenced to ten years, he stashed his gold
in a safehouse, tucked off-road, hidden by
a tree with three-winged leaves. No one has
ever found where or what he stashed away.

When Forrest Fenn was diagnosed – cancer
he surely wouldn't survive – he took his
jewels, coins, a handful of antiques,
and, for the thrill of the chase, buried it
in the Rockies, where he sat down and wrote
a poem, a riddle, a treasure map
with six stanzas, twenty-four lines, nine clues.
Hundreds of thousands of people have combed
where warm waters halt, three men stalled – dead stop,
washing ashore on the Rio Grande or
the Arkansas River. Yellowstone
saw one Indiana Jones plummet from
a slope, five hundred feet to the canyon
down. Treasure metastasized to legend.

Fresh off a plane, Takako Konishi
found her way to Fargo, North Dakota.
People say she watched Steve Buscemi, jaw
shot, with a briefcase and a million bucks,
fall to his knees, bury the cash under
barbed wire, ice stretching as far as the
screen would allow. Based on a true story,
she made her own map to find it and froze
to death looking for a red snow scraper.
She wasn't searching for the money, though,
but a quiet place to lie down in the
snow, to drink two champagne bottles alone,
to stare up at the stars and wonder if
they were different from the ones in Japan.

Plague

Such is the way of tumultuous times.
The sinking Titanic bandstand resumed,
expository newspapers unfolded, left
on seats at gates in airports abandoned.
Racing light-speed, unprepared, at the
light dimmed tomorrow with convictions
of ragdolls, six and a half million miles of
hacking, spittle, fascia muscle lining spaces
for lungs and the pockets of penny-pinchers.
O ye of little faith, who sit in witnessed
pews of plagues and battlefields, morgues,
scattered as smuggled, hand-rolled cigarettes
in a lifelong smoker's final pack. *One more*,
in the hospice home he wheezes. *One more*,
and *One more*, and *One more*, blood cough
speckled sheets and pillows, dead in the water,
cigarette held past balanced lips bit in half,
tobacco grounds stained back teeth and tongue.
O how ye forget Constantinople, decimated by
the black swelled plague they named for a saint.

Something Worth Protecting

“Perhaps in the world's destruction it would be possible at last to see how it was made.
Oceans, mountains. The ponderous counterspectacle of things ceasing to be. The
sweeping waste, hydroptic and coldly secular. The silence.”
-Cormac McCarthy, *The Road*

Superfamily Cicadoidea

Seventeen years of sleep
and that wasn't enough
to keep you tranquil, quiet.
No! We know it's summer
when you burst forth
and scream and caterwaul,
a heavy-metal hallelujah chorus
announcing to the world:
Wake up! The cicadas are here.

You pull yourself up from
the earth with pint-sized pincers
the sun hasn't seen for years.
You're an oatmeal-casted debutante
who climbs the nearest tree
and stripteases, abandoning
your paper-thin silhouette –
a rite of passage as you fly
with sticky, baby-fresh wings
while your shadow clings
to the tree for dear life.

Free at last, dead weight shed,
you're whole-heartedly yourself.
No one here likes you (we hate you)
but you rage and din despite us,
to spite us, the disc jockeys
of back porches, giving the mayfly
a run for its money for the short time
you get above ground,
but oh, how you spend it.

When you're found in the morning
your carapace is marked iridescent,
flown, now flattened, into the grill
of a car. Your lifelong quest for romance
ends when a little boy in swim trunks
picks you up, brings you to his mouth.
His mother gasps as he crunches down –
a rough-hewn kind of mitosis.

There will be no baby cicadas.
Your cicada sons and daughters
will not be there at your side,
on your death bed. The light in the
tunnel is at the back of a cat's throat,
under a laundry basket, a size nine
shoe, or a boxwood shrub where,
in your death throes a person
sees you, you whizz up at them,
saying (if you could) "I was here!"

Tsunami

I made pipe cleaner bracelets, at six years old,
when I heard about the Boxing Day Tsunami,
with no idea what Boxing Day was, or where
Indonesia was (I'd be hard-pressed even now)
I thought I'd sell the bands, two strands
strung as tightly together as little hands
could manage. In class the next day,
we journaled. First graders had a notebook
and a dictionary we filled out ourselves.

I might've heard a word, on the news
or from my parents, and the word "tsunami"
bounced around my head, a ricocheting
castaway in a leaking dinghy, whipped by the sea.
My mother told me it was a big wave,
and my heart broke for the drowned
as I myself had wiped out once or twice while
boogie boarding, yellow flag warning caution
to children with turtle-patterned arm floats
that swam too far out, close to riptides,
so my little mind at least knew
what it was like to be hit by water,
sunscreen running, saltwater eyes burning.

I struggled getting my words on the page.
I brought my paper dictionary, bound by
three staples, to my teacher, opened
to the "S" page. She smiled as she took it,
leafing the paper forward to the "T" page.
Her script looped, black, inking out "tsunami."
I, drilled and hooked on phonics, tried to put
the two halves together. "No," she said,
as she pointed to the capital letter.
"Sometimes T's are silent."

Arc

A driftwood telephone pole hefts
in the middle of a flooded bog pond,
glass blown transfusers, an animal
blurred down the path – either fawn
or coyotes big enough to grapple
and devour barnyard cats and
kindergartners. A standing beacon
in the water that turns greener
with every hit sunbeam and is hidden
when rain floods the deep ravine that
killed thirty in a derailed train wreck
joggers pass. The water is no cleaner
than in a foreclosed zoo, all the animals
gathered past gates condemned and are
set loose together by a good Samaritan –
lion, oryx, hippo, antelope, clustered giraffe
families – the smorgasbord is too busy eating
one another to turn on her. Every ounce
of lacking upper body strength she uses
to climb the telephone pole, to sit at the top
and petrify – spring rain pelts her, alligators
circle around, but their knife-edge claws,
rancid with rotting, shredded meat, find no
purchase, scratching, and they cannot climb.

Upsweep

Where pressure fractures skulls, the abyssal plain
of the ocean – what lurks there that can snap its jaws
once and bisect a great white? What marvelous

anomalies go unknown? The force of the meteor
might have launched dinosaurs to orbit, crushing
others to fine lunar dust – we know more of space

than the saltwater that would take four thousand
years to deplete if rain ceased, siphoning down
trenches, creeping up deltas, sunfish drifting and

sun-spotting until they belly up, nature's forgotten,
beloved saltine. Brine-crusting dead fish wash ashore
in an eye-stinging red tide, every open eye bored out

of their fishbone skulls. Lightning strikes the ocean
and a seal dies. Lightning strikes a river and a salmon
dies. Lightning strikes an offshore rig and a duckling,

oily down feathers slick and heavy, drowns to death
under the weight of itself. Pushed down by hydrostatic
pressure, the unknown noises from the ocean's floor –

an eldritch mother's cry for a lost child, iceberg fragments
scraping lithospheres as they move. On the surface,
a blue whale breaches a wave with her back, balancing

the still body of her calf, a pallbearer, as she cries and dirges
and is heard at a research station thousands of miles away.

Drawdown

The term for what occurs when land
becomes hydrous is liquefaction –
as a child I dreamt I rode passenger
through a series of hills stretching higher
than cranes. Smooth rounded mountains.
The mammoths collapsed in on themselves
as I drove by, a house of cards caving,
turning in an instant to turbid waves,
building and crashing with no debris,
rootless, rockless, only dream-green water
that was somehow solid earth at the same time.

Gull

You face towards the wind.
If you turn around, it'll blow you
and blow you like the striped blue beach ball
careening down the sand, moving too fast
for its owner to reach. He waves a hand at it
as it tumbles and flies until it's just a speck
and then nothing. You couldn't see it,
but you saw the man running towards you.
You unfurled your wings, batted them at him,
opened your beak and screeched, sidestepping
little cross-hatches onto the hot, white sand.

Why did you run away from him, panicked,
while you bob and weave now at my feet?
You're pecking for chip crumbs as I kick sand up at you,
arcing, landing on your outstretched wings.
And you, undeterred, unfettered, screeching again,
calling up a dark swarm of your hatch-mates,
peck and peck at the crumbs. You could have them all,
but you called down their dark fury, the legion
that would have descended upon the bag of chips
if I hadn't been six times your size, shouting
and shooing you away from your own home.

The flag flies double-red, but that doesn't deter you
from landing at the water's edge, shifting the sand
with your beak, searching for the shells with insides you can eat.
The waves crash and you take off just in time
that you're not dragged by the undertow, like a drowning sailor,
beneath the roiling and foaming waves. Do you hate the pelican,
I wonder, as it swoops down and snaps a fish up
from the crest of a wave? It's effortless, and here
you are, again, on the beach-front, begging me for scraps –
anything to spare – but from where I sit, looking down at you,
your squawking desperation looks a lot like greed.

Liquefaction

A tin mine collapsed to a cove
in Malaysia, near Pantai Remis,
drilled down hundreds of feet
until seawater seeped in through
microscopic pockets of earth, filled
the small places between the cracks
in rocks, worn porous and permeable
by decades of wear-and-tear. The edge
of the mine was a dam failing, emaciated,
holding back water with arms strained.
The ocean, obsidian rings on all ten
fingers, raged and clocked the bulletproof
glass, knowing its bounden duty
was to encroach upon the land.

The mine's owner left his crater abandoned,
once the workers mined his money's
worth of tin, lined his pockets with metal.
As his intrusion into the earth crept
to death, he knew the ocean would take back
its battered child, or seize an opportunity,
a geologic coup de grâce. Water did not crash
over the top of the mine, but took its time,
wedged pebbles loose slowly over years,
sent them free-falling down to the syncline.

The ocean knew that in a game of Jenga
you knock the tower over if you, with haste,
slide the bottom block out, leaving the rest
without foundation. The owner told the miners
to dig, to take that Jenga tower and slice it in half,
to take that half and halve it again. Did the ocean
finally knock it over with one sea-breeze,
a silent breath, or was it man's mass wasting
that caused the earth to buckle and give,
Atlas collapsing from the weight of the world?

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